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Sainthood and Social Boundary Crossing in Medieval Islamic North Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article considers how the spread of new modes of religiosity in the twelfth-century Maghrib, namely pietistic mysticism or *Ṣūfism*, enabled groups previously excluded from the ranks of religious ‘professionals’. It did this by placing a premium on charismatic rather than solely book-based approaches to religion. As a result, men and some women of rural and non-Arabic literate backgrounds were able to cross boundaries that had been difficult to breach.

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Boundaries, borders and barriers may take many forms and the genesis of this article lay in an invitation to consider their myriad permutations in the context of the medieval world.¹ Every society is criss-crossed by webs of invisible lines that define the normative path of a life, with class, ethnicity, gender and many other factors contributing to what is seen as possible or desirable for each individual. Equality of opportunity is a much-touted tenet of modern Western societies and we are sensitive to its presence and absence. Medieval societies were very different from our own but there are times and places where one can see people, consciously or sub-consciously, crossing or altering the normative boundary lines holding them in unequal places. Although pre-modern religious traditions were often deployed by established social elites to maintain the *status quo*, they could also provide alternative modes and narratives for those lower down the social pecking order, enabling them to traverse a variety of these invisible social boundaries. Islam in medieval North Africa was no exception and in what follows, I shall look at a particular era, the eleventh and twelfth centuries, during which the spread of new forms of religiosity enabled a range of individuals largely excluded from the religious elite to gain recognition. Before commencing, it is worth noting that contemporary historical research on the medieval Islamic Maghrib involves a multi-layered process of “decolonisation”. On the one hand, scholars have long been aware of the importance of reading beyond European, mostly French, colonial interpretations of the people and terrain of medieval North Africa and assimilation of parts of its history and population

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to either the Classically-rooted Christian European past (Berbers) or a medieval Islamic Oriental past (Arabs). On the other hand, as Ramzi Rouighi has pointed out, those working on medieval North Africa must not only extricate themselves from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial bind but also be alert to medieval Arab imperial discourses that shaped how the inhabitants of North Africa appear in Arabic writing, the corpus that formed the basis for later French colonial interpretations.

Most pertinently, the categorisation of the inhabitants of the region as the Berbers, “al-Barbar” or “al-Barābira”, was a pejorative classification and many people now prefer the term “Imazighen” (sing. Amazigh). However, both terms elide the differences between the peoples of medieval North Africa, who did not think of themselves as one, or share a single language or culture, rendering “Imazighen” inaccurate in a medieval context.² As a result, there is no straightforward solution or alternative to using these laden terms but, wherever possible, I shall describe the inhabitants of northwest Africa using ethno-linguistic or tribal denominations deployed in contemporary, albeit Arabic, sources.

Implicit biases affect two other areas that I shall explore. First, there is the issue of prejudice among those termed Arabs and Berbers against North Africans of colour, the so-called “Blacks” (*sūdān*), another umbrella term that elides the variety and complexity of medieval society in favour of sharp boundaries and hierarchies. Second, medieval Arabic texts tended to be produced by and for men of the literate urban classes, who often held dismissive opinions of women as well as of those they considered their social inferiors. Retrieving fragments of the role and status of both these groups in the eleventh- and twelfth-century socio-religious environment is central to the case for religious change as an opportunity for boundary crossing.

Evidence for this comes from a biographical dictionary of Šūfis composed in the early thirteenth century, Ibn al-Zayyāt al-Tādili’s *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf ilā rijāl al-tašawwuf*, which is a rich source for the origins, lifestyles and norms of the mystical life in the western Maghrib, a path that developed during this period and offered a complement and an alternative to the previously dominant scriptural and legal approaches to Islam.³ This intriguing text, discussed in detail below, has attracted the attention of scholars as one of the first full extant works of its kind from the Maghrib that provides insights into the region’s religious culture and society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the development of hagiography as a genre.⁴ It has proved invaluable in the study of individual Šūfis and their *oeuvre*,⁵ but also as a source shedding light on groups often excluded from historical chronicles or dismissed as the general populace (*āmma*) or even the rabble (*awbāsh*, *sufalā*), research upon which this article builds.⁶

²Ramzi Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers: History and Ideology in the Maghrib* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); *idem*, “The Berbers of the Arabs”, *Studia Islamica* 106/1 (2011): 49–76; Anneliese Nef, “L’invention des Berbères: Retour sur la genèse de la catégorie ‘Barbar’ au cours des premiers siècles de l’Islam”, in *Les Berbères entre Maghreb et Mashreq (VII^e–XV^e siècle)*, ed. Dominique Valérian (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2021) pp. 15–28. <https://books.openedition.org/cvz/25413>.

³Yūsuf b. al-Zayyāt al-Tādili [Ibn al-Zayyāt], *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf ilā rijāl al-tašawwuf*, ed. Aḥmad Tawfiq (Rabat: Kuliyat al-Ādāb wa-l-‘Ulūm al-Insāniyya, 2014 [first published 1984]).

⁴On the hagiographic genre in Morocco and extant examples, see Halima Ferhat and Hamid Triki, “Hagiographie et religion au Maroc médiéval”, *Hespéris Tamuda* 24 (1986): 17–51.

⁵*The Way of Abū Madyan*, ed. and trans. Vincent Cornell (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996).

⁶See Daphna Ephrat, “In Quest of an Ideal Type of Saint: Some Observations on the First Generation of Moroccan *awliyā* ‘Allāh in ‘Kitāb al-Tashawwuf’”, *Studia Islamica* 94 (2002): 67–84; Manuela Marín, “Etnia y religión: Acerca de los santos negros en el Marruecos medieval”, in *Hagiografías, sufismo, santos y santidad en el norte de África y península ibérica*, ed. Rachid El Hour (Helsinki: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennica, 2020), pp. 25–50.

The Emergence of an Islamic Society in North Africa

The conquest of North Africa by armies from the east in the late seventh to early eighth centuries CE initiated the penetration of a new religion, Islam, a new language, Arabic, and a new axis of centrality, which connected the Maghrib not to Rome or Constantinople but to the Hījāz and successive caliphal capitals in Syria and Iraq.⁷ Scholars alternatively describe the conquest as “Arab” or “Islamic”, while qualifying both terms as inaccurate in many ways. The conquerors lumped the inhabitants of the region together under the labels “Berbers”, as mentioned above, or “Romans” (*Rūm*), meaning the Christian Byzantine Romans – ethnic and religious labels that were equally inaccurate but did instantiate the desire on the part of the Arab Muslim conquerors to police access to the new elite that they constituted.

Within the Umayyad caliphal empire as a whole, well-known tactics such as clientage to Arabs (*walāʾ*), the covenant of protection offered to non-Muslims (*dhimma*), and differential taxation played their part in this gate-keeping project but, ultimately, it was impossible to associate all converts to Islam with Arab patrons, or to prevent larger groups converting to Islam and demanding rights initially only accorded to those of Arabian tribal background. Islam in the seventh to eighth centuries was not yet the fully-fledged system of belief and praxis that it became and one of the ways non-Arabs resisted early Arab elitism was through affiliation with its sectarian and oppositional strands, namely Khārijism and Shīʿism. Such strands often appealed to new converts whose mother tongue was not Arabic, since the close connection between that language and the new religion put them at a social disadvantage. This situation was exacerbated by the Umayyad Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik’s (r. 685–705) decision also to make Arabic the language of administration in place of Latin, Greek and Persian.⁸

This disadvantage was acute in North Africa, where indigenous communities largely converted to Islam without adopting Arabic, the reverse of the situation in regions like Syria, Egypt and the Iberian Peninsula, where Arabisation, in towns at least, often preceded conversion to Islam.⁹ Because Arabic was largely incomprehensible to most of the population of the western Maghrib, command of it could appear almost magical and carry considerable socio-political cachet. For instance, among the Barghawāta of the Atlantic plains, a set of tribes widely considered heretical for their adherence to a prophet from their own midst despite their early Islamic, possibly Khārijite, affiliations, stories circulated of the travels of their prophet-kings to the Arab-Islamic east and acquisition of arcane Arabic knowledge there.¹⁰ The status this gave them was, of course, dependent on its rarity in the region.

⁷For an overview of the conquest of North Africa, see Corisande Fenwick, “The Umayyads and North Africa: Imperial Rule and Frontier Society”, in *The Umayyad World*, ed. Andrew Marsham (London: Routledge, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315691411>, pp. 293–313.

⁸This may have stimulated the first phase of the Translation Movement. See George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

⁹See Dominique Valérián, *Islamisation et arabisation de l’Occident musulman médiéval (VII^e–XII^e siècle)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011).

¹⁰Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-ard*, ed. J. H. Kramers (Leiden: Brill, 1938–1939), p. 82; Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī, *Description de l’Afrique: Texte arabe*, ed. Le Baron de Slane (Imprimerie du gouvernement, Algiers, 1857), pp. 135–7. On the Barghawāta more broadly, see, R. Le Tourneau, “Barghawāta”, *EP*, volume I, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden, Brill, 1954–2005), pp. 1043–5; John Iskander, “Devout Heretics: The Barghawata in Maghribi Historiography”, *Journal of North African Studies* 12/1 (2007): 37–53.

As in other parts of the growing Islamic empire, the foundation and development of towns was one index of Islamic leadership in North Africa, where Tāhart, Sijilmāsa and Fes were founded by those claiming such leadership. These towns did promote Islamic learning and some knowledge of Arabic but wider Arabic speech and literacy remained limited, with infusions of population from al-Andalus, Ifrīqiya or further east credited with creating an Arab or Arabised urban stratum, as legends of the development of Fes and Tāhart show.¹¹ In the case of Fes, the contribution of the local Awraba tribes to its development was consistently side-lined in medieval Arabic chronicles, showing the persistence of ethno-linguistic assumptions over many centuries.¹² As for the Maghribī countryside, it remained lightly touched by the Islamic conquest or by Arabic, with notional affiliations to the new religion barely superseding older structures of belief, as the example of the Barghawāta shows.

In fact, the primary urban incubators of text-based Arabic-Islamic learning were Qayrawān in Ifrīqiya and Córdoba in al-Andalus rather than the towns of the Maghrib, with the possible exception of Tāhart, which was a centre of Ibādī Khārījite learning. Qayrawān and Córdoba were associated with the embedding of the Mālīkī school of law as the major legal school (*madhhab*) of the region and their nascent scholarly elites, the *‘ulamā’*, usually emerged from prosperous families from the Arab or Arabised urban strata. Although there were families and individuals of non-Arab origin in this elite, including Persians, North Africans and Iberians, it was arguably more challenging for them to follow this path and the socio-economic barriers in place kept their numbers relatively low. Moreover, advancement entailed the acceptance of dominant Arabic-Islamic narratives.

This situation began to alter from the tenth century, when emissaries, missionaries and armies began to promulgate the rival imperial missions of the Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ī Fāṭimids and the Mālīkī Sunnī Umayyads of Córdoba across the central and western Maghrib. Repeated campaigns squeezed out the Ibādī, Ṣufī and Zaydī principalities of the previous century and encouraged tribal peoples to affiliate themselves with either the Fāṭimid or Umayyad caliphs. In general, the Kutāma and Ṣanhāja of the central Maghrib joined the former, while the Zanāta became allies of the Umayyads, although strategic changes of loyalty were also common. Since these movements were religio-political, they entailed religious “conversion” as well as political affiliation and have often been seen as part of the long process of Islamisation in the Maghrib, requiring growing numbers of tribespeople to actively engage with the rituals and tenets of Islam, however defined.

These new trends were the bedrock supporting the political and religious changes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, including those evidenced in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*. The tenth-century imperial projects of the Fāṭimids in Ifrīqiya and the Umayyads in al-Andalus triggered the indigenous Islamic empire-building projects of the Almoravids and the Almohads, who constructed huge empires encompassing the Maghrib and

¹¹Fes was said to have received Arabic-speaking migrants from Córdoba and Qayrawān in the ninth century and Tāhart received migrants from Basra in Iraq. Ibn al-Qūṭiyya, *Ta’rīkh iftītāḥ al-Andalus*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Masrī and Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1982), p. 69; ‘Alī b. Abī Zar’, *Al-anīs al-muṭṭrib bi-rawḍ al-qirtās fī akhbār mulūk al-Maghrib wa-ta’rīkh madīnat Fās*, ed. Abdelwahab Benmansour (Rabat: Imprimerie Royale, 1999), pp. 35, 56; Mercedes García Arenal and Eduardo Manzano Moreno, “Idrīsisme et villes idrīsides”, *Studia Islamica* 82 (1995): 5–33, p. 15.

¹²García Arenal and Manzano Moreno, “Idrīsisme”, 16, 18–19.

al-Andalus where the Ṣanhāja and Maṣmūda peoples, respectively, became Islamic rulers supported by fellow tribesmen. Their rise reflected interlinked processes of Islamisation and urbanisation among the communities of the Maghribī steppe, mountain and desert. As the historian Ibn ʿIdhārī put it when speaking of the rise of the Almoravids, Ibn Yāsīn's mission was to promote the one Islamic Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) in place of the previous sectarian and non-Muslim tribal environment in which people would only follow the judgements of their own tribal chief.¹³

This assertion of one correct form of Islam and the engagement of numerous tribes behind first Mālikī Sunnism and then Almohadism was shaped by wider grass-roots religious changes with which the Almoravids and Almohads interacted. These changes took the form of a shift in the modalities of Islamic praxis to include ascetic exercises and personal spiritual communion with God, thereby promoting a person-centred charismatic approach to Islam alongside the scriptural learning of the *ʿulamāʾ*. This mystical path to God, termed Ṣūfism (*al-taṣawwuf*) in the Islamic East, enabled indigenous Maghribīs who were not literate in Arabic to finally breach the socio-cultural boundary that kept them out of the highly-educated Arab-Islamic scholarly class. Narratives of charisma and direct communion with God enabled those of low social status, the uneducated, ethnic minorities and women to circumvent the barriers preventing them from becoming religious leaders by providing an alternative route to religious prestige, open to all. Moreover, such charismatic leadership was more appealing to the masses for whom it provided an Islamised echo of earlier, sometimes pre-Islamic, modalities of belief and practice.

Founding figures in both the Almoravid and Almohad movements were linked to this milieu. The Ṣanhāja Almoravids or al-Murābiṭūn, “the men of (the) *ribāṭ*”, emerged from an environment in which rural centres called *ribāṭs* had started to supplement distant towns as foci of Islamic instruction. Such centres could also function as rallying points for military campaigns, drawing on the root meaning of *ribāṭ* as a tethering or girding of animals and men for war, and thus a near synonym for *jihād*.¹⁴ The Almoravid movement was indirectly associated with the *ribāṭ* or *dār al-murābiṭīn* of Wāggāg b. Zaluw (or Zalwī) situated in the Sūs valley, and conflated by some scholars with Ribāṭ Māssa.¹⁵ Another important *ribāṭ* was Ribāṭ Tiṭ-n-Fiṭr whose origins have been studied by Vincent Cornell.¹⁶ The heads of these *ribāṭs* were venerated figures who could possess high levels of Islamic education and Arabic literacy: Wāggāg was said to have studied with Abū ʿImrān al-Fāsī in Ifrīqiya, and the Banū Amghār of Ribāṭ Tiṭ-n-Fiṭr corresponded with Ifrīqiyan jurists. The Sharīʿa in question was the Mālikī *madhhab*, which was the school championed by the Almoravids and their initial religious ideologue, ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn, identified in several sources as a pupil of Wāggāg.¹⁷

¹³Ibn ʿIdhārī, *Bayān al-mughrib fi akhbār al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib*, volumes I–IV, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ʿAlī, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya), IV: 9–10. See also Amira K. Bennison, “Relations between Rulers and Ruled in the Medieval Maghrib: The ‘Social Contract’ in the Almoravid and Almohad Centuries, 1050–1250”, *Comparative Islamic Studies* 10/2 (2014): 137–56, pp. 143–8.

¹⁴For instance, Ibn Ḥawqal describes the *ribāṭ* at Salé as a military rallying point for campaigns against the Barghawāta. Ibn Hawqal, *Ṣūrat al-ard*, 81–2.

¹⁵Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Taṣawwuf*, entry 5, p. 89. Vincent J. Cornell, “Ribāṭ Tiṭ-n-Fiṭr and the Origins of Moroccan Maraboutism”, *Islamic Studies* 27/1 (1988): 23–36, p. 26.

¹⁶See Cornell, “Ribāṭ Tiṭ-n-Fiṭr”.

¹⁷In addition to imbibing the Mālikism of Qayrawān from Wāggāg, Ibn Yāsīn may also have studied with Mālikī *ʿulamāʾ* in Córdoba. Ibn ʿIdhārī, *Bayān*, IV: 9.

However, *ribāṭ* leaders, as their presence in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* shows, supplemented their Arabic religio-legal learning with pietistic practices and popular spiritual leadership, leading Cornell to characterise their religious approach as “a Sharʿī form of Sufism”.¹⁸ Popular recognition of their status required indications that they were individuals with charismatic and sometimes miraculous powers as well as being knowledgeable in Islamic law. Furthermore, the success of a *ribāṭ* and its leaders lay in the instrumentalisation of their skills through service to the rural, tribal population, which stretched beyond religious education to intangible support such as mediation in inter-tribal conflicts and intercession for rain. As Daphna Ephrat explains, this combination of legal learning, spiritual knowledge and charismatic power was a distinguishing feature of early Moroccan Ṣūfism.¹⁹ These were also the time-honoured qualities of North African “prophets”, now grafted onto an Islamic framework through the medium of mysticism.

The next religio-political movement to spread through North Africa, the Almohad mission, shared some of these elements and was equally directed towards the rural tribal milieu at its onset. The Maṣmūda Almohads or al-Muwaḥḥidūn, a name that may be translated as “monotheists” or “unitarians”, were the followers of Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130), to whom an educational excursus east to study with al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) was attributed. The facts of this matter have been widely debated in Islamic and Western scholarship but the crucial point here is that Ibn Tūmart’s mission can be seen as a revival of Islam in the same vein as al-Ghazālī’s famous *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*) with the striking difference that Ibn Tūmart was identified as the divine guide of that revival, the *mahdī*, a charismatic, prophet-like figure.²⁰

At the start of his career, however, Ibn Tūmart was part of the wider, mystical and pietistic environment fostered in *ribāṭ*s and smaller urban mosques, where al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyāʾ* was often consulted, as references to it in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* indicate.²¹ In his biography, written by a disciple known as al-Baydhaq, Ibn Tūmart is described using these venues to teach ordinary people the rudiments of the faith.²² Although Ibn Tūmart’s recognition as the *mahdī* subsequently gave him an exclusive and universal status, he commenced as a rural religious teacher, preacher and thaumaturge very much in the pattern of other figures in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*. Therefore, it is not entirely coincidental that the Almohad cities, Ribāṭ al-Faṭḥ and Ribāṭ Tāzā, have the term “*ribāṭ*” in their name. The Almohad authorities also took the radical step of promoting religious use of the “western tongue”, the Maṣmūda language, rather than just Arabic on the grounds that each individual believer had to understand his or her faith. Ibn Tūmart used it to teach the High Atlas tribes and, as the Almohad Empire developed, one of its distinguishing features was the unprecedented parallel use of the Maṣmūda language for sermons and religious rituals alongside Arabic.²³

¹⁸Cornell, “Ribāṭ Tiṭ-n-Fiṭr”, 26.

¹⁹Ephrat, “An Ideal Type”, 76–8.

²⁰For a summary of the debate, see Amira K. Bennison, *The Almoravid and Almohad Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 62–4.

²¹For example Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Hawwārī is described copying out the *Iḥyāʾ* and using its litanies and prayers daily. Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, Entry 118, p. 270.

²²Al-Baydhaq, ʿAlī al-Ṣanhāji, *Kitāb Akhbār al-mahdī Ibn Tūmart*, ed. ʿAbd al-Hamīd Ḥājjiyāt (Algiers: Al-Sharika al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ) (1975/1395), pp. 36, 37, 47, 48, 51, 54; Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 251.

²³[Ibn Simāk al-Malaqī], *Kitāb al-Hulal al-mawshiyya fī dhikr al-akhbār al-Marrākushiyya*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār and ʿAbd al-Qādir Zamāma (Casablanca: Dār al-Rashād al-Ḥadītha, 1979), pp. 109–10; Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*,

As products of a freshly Islamised rural milieu in which charismatic, person-centred Islam conveyed in local dialects had more traction than erudite urban text-driven scriptural modes, the Almoravids and Almohads were nervous of religio-political challenges from this same milieu. At the behest of scholars, the Almoravid *amīr* ‘Alī b. Yūsuf twice ordered the burning of al-Ghazālī’s *Ihyā’* which had become a touchstone for conflict between Māliki jurists and those of a more mystical bent, and he summoned several mystics to Marrakesh for interrogation in the early 1140s.²⁴ The first Almohad caliph, ‘Abd al-Mu’min (r. 1130–1163), was threatened in 1147 by an uprising led by al-Hādī, a religious personage associated with Ribāṭ Māssa, who is omitted from the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, and half a century later, the Almohad caliph, Ya‘qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 1184–99) summoned a famous mystic, Abū Madyan Shu‘ayb, to Marrakesh, a trip interrupted by Abū Madyan’s death and burial at al-‘Ubbād outside Tlemcen, a gathering point for mystics.²⁵

However, the spread of popular mysticism could not be stopped in either North Africa or al-Andalus and, in the ensuing centuries, the idea of the charismatic Muslim holy man or woman became entrenched throughout Maghribī society and their tomb shrines became a ubiquitous part of the landscape in town and countryside. Although some such individuals were highly educated, the emphasis on charisma in determining sanctity enabled those of non-Arab extraction with limited if any Arabic literacy to become religious leaders and people of authority within society, generating what I have described elsewhere as a quiet revolution occurring below the level of the dramatic religio-political upheavals of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.²⁶

Ibn al-Zayyāt al-Tādilī’s *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*

At the centre of this article stands the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf ilā rijāl al-taṣawwuf* (A Loving Look at the Men of Sufism), which was composed around 1220 by Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf b. Yaḥyā b. ‘Īsā al-Tādilī (d. 1229–30), also known as Ibn al-Zayyāt, an individual from the Tadla region, located southwest of the Middle Atlas and north of the High Atlas, who spent much of his life in Marrakesh and served as a *qāḍī* in the late Almohad Empire.²⁷ Ibn al-Zayyāt composed his work with the dual purpose of introducing the eastern concept of Ṣūfism to Maghribīs and providing an encyclopaedia of Maghribīs who could be considered Ṣūfis for his domestic readership and those further east. As he says in his preface:

67. See also Linda Jones, “The Preaching of the Almohads: Loyalty and Resistance Across the Strait of Gibraltar”, *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 71–101, pp. 76–80.

²⁴ See Delfina Serrano Ruano, “Why Did the Scholars of al-Andalus Distrust al-Ghazālī? Ibn Rushd al-Jadd’s *fatwa* on *awliyā’ Allāh*”, *Der Islam* 83/1 (2006): 137–56; Janina Safran, “The Politics of Book Burning in Al-Andalus”, *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 6/2 (2014): 148–68; Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 242–4.

²⁵ Cornell, *Way of Abū Madyan*, 15; Denis Gril, “Abū Madyan”, in *Encyclopedia of Islam, THREE*, eds. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe and Devin J. Stewart (Leiden: Brill 2007-).

²⁶ Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 268.

²⁷ Ahmed Toufiq, the editor of the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, notes that it is not entirely clear whether Ibn al-Zayyāt’s father migrated to Marrakesh when he was a small child or before he was born. Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, 21; see also, Rachid El Hour, “Ibn al-Zayyāt al-Tādilī”, *Encyclopedia of Islam, THREE*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_32313. First published online 2018; consulted online on 16 June 2023.

There was a great party of [mystics] in the far Maghrib whose histories were neglected and whose remains were unknown, to the point that someone who had no knowledge about them would think there were none in the far Maghrib and that it was far-fetched to think there could be a friend [of God] or a spiritual exemplar (*waṭad*) there. How preposterous, the situation is not like that at all. Seek and you will find!²⁸

As Halima Ferhat and Hamid Triki note, his complaint regarding the ignorance of easterners about the spiritual luminaries of the west was not unlike that made by Ibn al-ʿArabī shortly beforehand and shows a certain patriotic pride.²⁹ Ibn al-Zayyāt presents 277 biographical entries (*tarājim*) ranging in length from short paragraphs to several pages, with frequent cross-references noting the connections between many of these figures. Although the focus is on Marrakesh, the Almohad capital, and surrounding regions, individuals from many other parts of the Maghrib are also included. The book concludes with a longer account of the life of one holy man, Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Jaʿfar al-Sabtī (1130–1205), who settled in Almohad Marrakesh and was later recognised as one of the seven holy protectors of the city.³⁰ Several of the figures described by Ibn al-Zayyāt appear in other dictionaries such as al-Tamīmī's *Mustafād* and Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ's *Madārik*, but many are unique to his collection, especially when it comes to the less well-known and feted individuals, whose presence in his work testifies to the social change taking place. Subsequent dictionaries quoted material from Ibn al-Zayyāt or strove to fill gaps in his coverage.³¹

As an early example of a Maghribī hagiographical dictionary, Ibn al-Zayyāt's work brought together orally transmitted anecdotes about individuals chosen by popular acclaim as people of God and recorded them, thereby defining the characteristics of Maghribī sanctity in his time.³² The entries in the book present an eclectic range of individuals from pious jurists to mendicants, bound by their pietistic approach and the notion that they all had access to divine knowledge of one kind or another, manifested in their humble lifestyle, devotional and ascetic practices, and miracles (*karamāt*). He rarely uses the term “Šūfī” for the individuals in the collection, favouring instead the term *ṣūlahāʾ* (sing. *ṣāliḥ*), suggesting righteousness, and the compound phrase *awliyāʾ Allāh*, “friends of God” (sing. *walī Allāh*). He also frequently uses the term ascetic (sing. *zāhid*, pl. *zuhhād*) and its synonyms.³³ Some figures have gone down in history as founders of Maghribī Šūfism, such as Ibn al-ʿArīf al-Šanhāji (Entry 18), Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Ḥirzihim (Entry 51), Abū Yaʿza Yallanūr b. Maymūn al-Dukkālī (Entry 77) and Abū Madyan Shuʿayb (Entry 162). Others do not quite fit this profile, for instance Wāggāg b. Zaluw, or the plethora of local cult figures, male and female, who seem to belong to a much older world of belief and practice in the process of being reinterpreted through an Islamic lens.

Whether famous or forgotten, however, there is a persistent sense in which their collective practices invert elite social assumptions and norms and allow Muslims of diverse backgrounds to traverse the boundaries that urban religious scholars had placed around

²⁸Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, 31.

²⁹Ferhat and Triki, “Hagiographie”, 25.

³⁰H. Bencheneb, “al-Sabtī”, in *EF*. Consulted online 12 April 2023 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6385.

³¹Ferhat and Triki, “Hagiographie”, 31–2.

³²*Ibid.*, 18.

³³On the terms Ibn al-Zayyāt uses and his depiction of sanctity, see Ephrat, “An Ideal Type”, 72–7.

their cohort. This argument may seem to reinstate “the often refuted dialectical model of ‘popular’ versus ‘elitist’ religion” but this is not my intention.³⁴ Many highly-educated individuals adopted ascetic and mystical practices and it was certainly possible to be a jurist or scholar and an ascetic or mystic, as many examples in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* show. The point of interest here is not the doctrinal or theological dimensions of the religious developments of this era, but different ways of doing religion provided a new range of opportunities for people to breach social barriers that often disbarred them from membership of religious elites. At the very least, the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* shows the appreciation of an educated Arabic-literate man for spiritual virtuosity in a greater range of guises than previously acknowledged.

Boundary-Crossing in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*

The biographical entries in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* indicate that, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the ordinary population of the south of what is now Morocco were engaged in forms of socio-religious boundary-crossing, encompassing what we now refer to as class, ethnicity and gender. Commencing with class or, to use a less anachronistic term, social status, one constitutive element of the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* is its definition of the normative characteristics of a holy man or woman, which differed from those associated with membership of the religious scholarly cohorts, denoted by the terms ‘*ulamā*’ (scholars), *fuqahā* (jurists) and, in the Almohad empire, *ṭalaba* (scholars).

Theoretically, the scholarly path was open to boys and men of aptitude and it is often cited as a route to social mobility in medieval Islamic societies. As noted above, however, the need to master classical Arabic, a large corpus of sacred texts and exegetical and jurisprudential commentary material privileged those who had the skills, time and wealth to invest. Native speakers and writers of Arabic had an advantage over speakers of the Amazigh languages, as did urbanites from families with a tradition of holding religio-legal positions and thus established sets of connections among the urban elite. Furthermore, family wealth enabled lineages to absorb the expenditure and loss of income required for young men to study for several years. Conversely, it was difficult for people of rural or poorer urban background, regardless of the language they spoke, to acquire the skills and connections to become religious professionals, or for families to afford the costs of losing the labour of their young men for extended periods.

Ṣūfism with its emphasis on ascetism and piety, and allowance of religious ecstasy, provided new charismatic ways to demonstrate Islamic leadership that were accessible to non-Arabic speakers and people of limited education as well as more erudite individuals. Demonstrations of charismatic power represented direct, intuitive communion with God and knowledge of Him, known in Arabic as *maʿrifa*, as opposed to acquired scholarly knowledge (*ʿilm*). Although it is important not to exaggerate the percentage of illiterate or uneducated holy men listed in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*,³⁵ some of the most well-known early mystics of North Africa, mentioned above, are described in a way that valorises their humble origins. It is hardly unusual to see celebrations of poverty as a form of sanctity in medieval religious practice, but the context and time in which such

³⁴Ephrat, “An Ideal Type”, 71.

³⁵Ferhat and Triki, “Hagiographie”, 43.

features emerge and how they enter the literary and religious canon are varied. While humility and ascetism had a long history in the Islamic world, leavened by the conversion of Eastern Christians and Gnostics to Islam, in the Maghrib the written valorisation of lowly origins, abstinence and a humble lifestyle dates to this period.

Ibn al-ʿArīf al-Ṣanhājī was the son of a nightwatchman in Tangier and Abū Yaʿza Yallanūr al-Dukkālī was famously illiterate and received his inspiration directly from God. The latter passed his knowledge on to Abū Madyan Shuʿayb, thus becoming a progenitor of Maghribī Ṣūfism. Abū Madyan himself is reported as saying he was an orphan of lowly Andalusī background who did not even know how to pray. He was set to work as a shepherd by his brothers but he ran away to the Maghrib, where he worked as a day labourer and a soldier before travelling to Fes to acquire the rudiments of an Islamic education. He struggled to comprehend literary Arabic until he encountered ʿAlī b. Ḥirzihim in Fes, who spoke directly to his heart.³⁶ From the Ṣūfī perspective, pure language (*fuṣḥā*) took second place to spiritual purity and the only comprehensible religious erudition was that of Ibn Ḥirzihim (d. 1164), a mystic as well as a scholar, while, by implication, the incomprehensible classical Arabic used by other *ʿulamāʾ* in Fes was not a mark of prestige but of spiritual vacuity.

In addition to the depiction of eminent mystics as men or women of humble origin, an aspect of saintly praxis reiterated in numerous entries, short as well as long, was to live a simple life, earn one's own living by "honest graft", and perform daily chores. Several entries laud holy men and women for tilling their own land, doing their own laundry and preparing their own meals, with foraging raw, often plant food favoured as the most ascetic and spiritually noble means of nourishing the body.³⁷ For example, Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar b. Maʿād al-Ṣanhājī, who had links to the Banū Amghār of Ribāt Ṭīt-n-Fiṭr, nourished himself with honey foraged from beehives and fish he caught in the sea.³⁸

This celebration of the lifestyle of the poor, if not the destitute, was not universal among Ṣūfīs, as the later example of al-Shādhilī showed, but it is a strong thread running through the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, which juxtaposes righteous poverty against political power and wealth, which are inherently tainted and corrupting. The "friends of God" who bowed to social pressure or inadvertently consumed its fruits suffered. For instance, Munya bint Maymūn al-Dukkālī (d. 1198–9) received a gift of food from a merchant and heard it calling out to her, "Do not eat me. I am forbidden!", implying that it was paid for by ill-gotten gains. She still ate a morsel so as not to embarrass the merchant but for three days afterwards she understood her prayers to be rejected because she heard shouting all around her of the kind used "to get dogs to slink off on their bellies", a psychological disturbance indicating her suspicion that the merchant's food must have been paid for by illicit profit.³⁹

Conversely, the book contains a number of edifying anecdotes in which the wealthy or politically powerful come to realise that they could only erase the sins occasioned by their position through abandoning their previous pretensions and possessions. For instance, ʿAlī b. Ḥirzihim was said to have been summoned by a Ṣanhāja Almoravid *amīr* who wanted to learn from him. When he entered, the *amīr* was comfortably seated on a

³⁶Ibn al-Zayyāt, *al-Tashawwuf*, Entry 162, p. 320.

³⁷Ephrat, "An Ideal Type", 74–5.

³⁸Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, Entry 59, p. 183.

³⁹*Ibid.*, Entry 160, p. 318.

couch and Ibn Ḥirzihim sat down before him on the floor but said, “Is this how you treat someone you are learning from?” When the *amīr* replied, “Yes”, Ibn Ḥirzihim peremptorily said, “Get down and take my place! I shall take yours as that is how the student should behave with the teacher”. Ibn Ḥirzihim followed this overturning of the socio-political hierarchy with instructions to the *amīr* to live piously and eat only barley bread in order to attain salvation.⁴⁰

A second major area of interest in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* is the breaching of ethnic and racial boundaries through the recognition of indigenous Maghribī “Berbers” and “Blacks” among the ranks of the “friends of God”, and the positive mystical coding of terms related to colour, enslavement or servility as well as poverty. Although new opportunities opened up for speakers of the “western tongue” during the Almohad era as mentioned above, one still needed to possess Arabic scriptural knowledge in order to enter the Almohad scholarly elite, the *ṭalaba*. However, knowledge of the Arabic religious corpus was not essential in order to be recognised as a friend of God, even if it remained desirable. Within the world of the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, numerous individuals from the rural tribes of the western Maghrib appear with nearly 60% of entries (160) providing a Maghribī name or tribal *nisba* and the identification of several other people as such within their biographies. On the one hand, this is not surprising given the exclusive presence of indigenous tribes in the western Maghrib prior to the twelfth-century migrations of various Arab Banū Hilāl and Sulaym tribes but, on the other, it demonstrates the textual recognition of such individuals, previously disregarded as traditional if not heterodox figures, via a new hagiographical genre.

Although it is not explicitly stated, the listing of such figures also signals a shift in urban-rural relations. As Ferhat and Triki comment, the trope of the Ṣūfī fleeing the decadent town for the countryside is not borne out by the biographies in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, which give clear evidence of clusters of mystics in Marrakesh, Aghmāt, Fes and other towns.⁴¹ Nonetheless, many individuals within these clusters were of rural origin, as their tribal *nisbas* indicate. Their migration to towns coincided with the urban development taking place during the Almoravid and Almohad eras, the period when Marrakesh was founded and several other towns became significantly larger. It is suggestive that two of the most frequent tribal *nisbas* for holy men are “Haskūri” and “Ṣanhājī”, two groups that Ibn ‘Idhārī says the Almohad Caliph Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf (r. 1213–1224) ordered to resettle in Marrakesh when he initiated the project to expand the city, completed by his son, Ya‘qūb al-Manṣūr, in the last year of his reign (579/1183–4).⁴²

The settlement of tribal groups in towns encouraged a transposition of rural patterns of charismatic religious leadership to towns, and the blending of urban mystical practice with rural piety to produce the prototypical holy man of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The events around the death in 1141 of Ibn Barrajān, an educated urban mystic from Almería, show the mutual reinforcement of mystical and pietistic ties across the social classes in Marrakesh, and the hostility of the Mālikī jurists, in this case the judge of Almería, towards the blurring of social boundaries that such a religious approach

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, Entry 51, p. 169.

⁴¹Ferhat and Triki, “Hagiographie”, 41.

⁴²Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Bayān*, IV: 225.

facilitated. The judge of Almería persuaded the Almoravid *amīr*, ‘Alī b. Yūsuf, to summon a number of mystics to Marrakesh to be interrogated on their suspect religious and political positions.

The elderly Ibn Barraġān and Ibn al-‘Arīf al-Ṣanhājī were duly taken in manacles to the capital, where Ibn Barraġān died of his mistreatment. According to the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, the *amīr* ordered that his body be cast on a rubbish heap, thereby rejecting his right to a proper Islamic burial and questioning his identity as a Muslim. A black servant (*rajul aswad*) of the *amīr* who was part of Marrakesh’s pietistic community rushed to tell ‘Alī b. Ḥirzihim. He responded,

“If you have sold your soul to God, do what I tell you”. The man replied, “Command me to do whatever you wish.” He replied, “Shout in the markets and streets of Marrakesh, Ibn Ḥirzihim says to you, ‘Attend the funeral of the noble, ascetic shaykh and jurist, Abū l-Ḥakam b. Barraġān’. Anyone who can attend and does not, will be cursed by God!”⁴³

As a result of the surge of popular support galvanised by Ibn Ḥirzihim, the *ṣulahā* of Marrakesh, and their devotees, the Almoravid *amīr* relented and Ibn Barraġān had a proper burial, which not only recognised his religious status but also inverted the Almoravid Mālikī position by stating that failure to witness his sanctity through attendance at the funeral would elicit a divine curse.

In this anecdote, the Almoravid *amīr*’s black servant who had attended Ibn Ḥirzihim’s teaching sessions is the channel by which the wrongs done to Ibn Barraġān are righted and the intersection between local tribal identities, somatic characteristics and social status add another layer to the discussion. A significant black minority lived in the area from Marrakesh to the Sahara in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, some of whom appear in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* as “friends of God”. This group were often of lowly social origin and, while “Berber” may be a dismissive Arabic term, many North Africans and Andalusīs used the collective term “Blacks” (*sūdān*) in an equally dismissive and prejudiced way that connected skin colour to servile or enslaved socio-legal status and non-Muslim “infidel” origins.⁴⁴

Like “Arab” and “Berber”, “black” conceals as much as it reveals and suggests sharp dividing lines that were considerably more blurred in reality and encompassed differences between sedentarists and pastoralists, and tribal and non-tribal populations, as well as skin colour. As a result, scholars have long debated the origins of black populations north of the Sahara and their socio-legal status. Many of these elements appear in the conflicting explanations of the origin of the term “Ḥarṭānī” (pl. Ḥarāṭīn) used for the sedentary black population of the Moroccan pre-Saharan oases, that include derivation from a Berber term for “black” (*āḥarḍān*), the Arabic verb to plough (*ḥaratha*), and unfree or servile socio-legal status in contrast to tribesmen.⁴⁵ This connected notions of freedom to tribal pastoralism in the sense of the Arabic term *aḥrār*, a

⁴³Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, 170.

⁴⁴Such attitudes had pre-Islamic Semitic origins linked to myths that Noah’s son, Ham, was cursed with blackness, which he then passed on to his descendants as a mark of ancestral fault. See David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁴⁵Chouki El Hamel, “‘Race’, Slavery and Islam in Maghribi Mediterranean Thought: The Question of the *Haratin* in Morocco”, *Journal of North African Studies* 7/3 (2002): 29–52, pp. 38–9; *idem*, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 110–11. For a different view, see G.S. Colin, “Ḥarṭānī”, in *EP*.

synonym of *imazighen*, terms for free men that encapsulate freedom in the sense of a tribe's ability to protect the community against the depredations of both other communities and dynastic tax collectors and armies. Sedentary agriculturalists, tied to their homes, lands and villages were, according to this definition, unfree, even if not legally enslaved. In discussion of lands south of the Sahara, "blacks" stands in opposition to "Muslims", thereby associating skin colour with paganism and making enslavement of such communities legal according to the Sharī'a.

It is difficult to ascertain how embedded such ideas were in the twelfth century, as opposed to the early modern period when the association between the black population and enslavement or slave origin was made explicit by the 'Alawī Sultan Mawlay Ismā'il (r. 1672–1727), who rounded up black men and forced them into his army, the so-called "Slaves of al-Bukhārī" (*'abīd al-bukhārī*), which was modelled on the Ottoman Janissary corps.⁴⁶ This association between blackness and military slavery in the western Maghrib has led to assumptions that the black units in the Almoravid and Almohad armies were also enslaved or freedmen, but early references to black elements in the military are quite ambiguous. Ibn Ḥayyān's *Muqtabis*, which quotes extensively from the tenth-century Umayyad court diaries of al-Rāzī, says that al-Ḥakam II (r. 961–976) recruited "ruffians and slaves" both "white and black" from among the Berber tribes in the Ceuta area to form a low status corps called the "Tangerines" (al-Ṭanjīyīn) after the port of Tangier, a sentence that raises more questions than answers about the origins of the corps.⁴⁷

The Ṣanhāja Almoravid rulers of the eleventh century were themselves dark-skinned Saharans and Yūsuf b. Tāshfīn, their greatest *amīr* (r. 1061–1106), is specifically described as having dark skin and tightly-curved hair.⁴⁸ Black Almoravid tribesmen were free due to their tribal status but many of their black troops are described as *'abīd*, from those recruited by Yūsuf for his personal guard to the supposed three thousand killed by the Almohads outside Aghmāt in 1129.⁴⁹ Certainly later authors who used the term *'abīd* likely assumed that they were unfree, but their legal status is actually as unclear as that of the white northern Slavs (*ṣaqāliba*) in al-Andalus or Turkish *ghilmān* in the Islamic east. There is a similar lack of clarity in the case of the black man described as "serving" (*yakhdimu*) the *amīr*, since *khādim* could mean a free or unfree servant, or act as a euphemism for a eunuch.

In the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, Ibn al-Zayyāt uses the term "black" (*aswad*) to describe 30 individuals, around 11% of entries, and more rarely "dark" (*asmar*), indicating that dark skin was seen as a noteworthy physical characteristic in contrast to "white" (*abyaḍ*), a term rarely used except for Albinos as Marín points out.⁵⁰ The term "Ḥartānī" does not appear in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* to identify such individuals as sedentary agriculturalists; on the contrary, some black saints are given a tribal affiliation (*nisba*), predominantly "Haskūri" or "Ṣanhājī". Marín attributes this feature to the "mixing" of "Berber and Black" populations over an extended period, possibly due to the transport of

⁴⁶El Hamel, "Race, Slavery and Islam", 31–2, 44–5; *idem Black Morocco*, especially chs 5 and 6.

⁴⁷Ibn Ḥayyān, *Al-Muqtabis fi akhbār balad al-Andalus*, ed. Abdurrahman Ali al-Hajji (Beirut: Dar Assakafa, 1965), p. 190.

⁴⁸Vincent Lagardère, *Les Almoravides*, volume I: *Jusqu'au règne de Yūsuf B. Tāshfīn (1039-1106)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), pp. 79–80; Ronald Messier, *The Almoravids and the Meanings of Jihad* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), p. 55.

⁴⁹Ibn 'Idhārī, *Bayān*, IV : 72.

⁵⁰Marín, "Etnia y religión", 29.

enslaved persons along the trans-Saharan trade routes running through Sijilmāsa to Aghmāt.⁵¹ Political and tribal elites also practised concubinage with women brought from the borderlands of the Islamic world, contributing to ethnic diversity at the top level of society. In the case of the Almoravid royal line, concubinage introduced light-skinned Christian northern Iberian women (*rūmiyyāt*) such as ‘Alī b. Yūsuf’s own mother, Qamar, and the mother of his son Tāshfīn, Dhū’ l-Sabāḥ, but also black women from the south.⁵² A black minority were therefore present throughout western Maghribī society.

Scholars have noted colour prejudice among the Maṣmūda, the tribal group behind the Almohad movement, drawing on Abū Madyan’s gratitude to a disciple, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Jazūlī, who married his black concubine after she bore him a son, “even though marriage to an Abyssinian (*habashiyya*) is shameful among the Maṣmūda”.⁵³ While colour played a part, such prejudices also relate to tribal preferences for marriages that generated alliances and possible support from maternal, tribal kin (*akhwāl*). Marriage to a concubine uprooted from her natal familial networks, whether black or white, led to a loss of such opportunities.

In the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, deployment of “black” (*aswad*) and “dark” (*asmar*) to describe people contributes to the volume’s wider valorisation of characteristics seen as low-class and inversion of social assumptions about elite and non-elite characteristics. The Prophet’s well-known appointment of Bilāl “the Ethiopian” as his muezzin, and the Ibādī assertion that the imam should be the best Muslim, even if that person was a black slave, provided precedents for this trend. The use of “black” therefore has a similar resonance to illiteracy or humble background while also asserting divine favour towards the “wretched of the earth” and their elevation above those seen as “elite” in purely worldly terms, a reversal rhetorically claimed by the Almohads themselves.

An anecdote about Abū Shu‘ayb Ayyūb al-Ṣanhājī conveys this idea. When the governor of Azammūr planned to execute a group of people, Abū Shu‘ayb, who is described as dark-skinned (*asmar al-lawn*), came to intercede for them. The governor had him chased away but he was then afflicted by a severe pain.

Someone said to him, “The man that you turned away was Abū Shu‘ayb, one of the friends of God, how dreadful that you turned him away!” So [the governor] ordered that he be brought to him and when [Abū Shu‘ayb] came he interceded on behalf of those [the governor] had ordered to be killed and the pain dissipated.⁵⁴

Manuela Marín observes that “dark” (*asmar*) may indicate skin darkened by exposure to the elements rather than sub-Saharan African.⁵⁵ This may be compared to the valorisation of the performance of humble tasks as a mark of the spiritual elite. On one occasion at least, the darkening or blackening of the skin is explicitly attributed to ascetic, devotional practices, making it an indicator of sanctity. Ibn al-Zayyāt says that he visited Munya bint Maymūn al-Dukkālī, whom we previously encountered

⁵¹*Ibid.* 32–3, 34.

⁵²Ibn Abī Zar’, *Rawḍ al-qirtās*, 198, 208. The mother of Sir b. ‘Alī is also identified as a concubine called Qamar, while the mother of another of ‘Alī’s sons, Ibrāhīm, was the son of a black concubine called Tāgh-y-sh-t. Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Bayān*, IV: 68, 83.

⁵³Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, Entry 164, p. 328; Cornell, *Way of Abū Madyan*, 14; El Hamel, “‘Race’, Slavery and Islam”, 43–4.

⁵⁴Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, Entry 62, p. 188; Marín, “Etnia y religión”, 42.

⁵⁵Marín, “Etnia y religión”, 29.

suffering from eating the merchant's food, "when she was elderly and she had become dark from her ascetic efforts and her skin clung to her bones".⁵⁶ The possibility of dark skin indicating superior devotion inverted incipient judgement of individuals based on skin colour, rooted in the Semitic "curse of Ham" narrative, in a similar way to the celebration of poverty.⁵⁷

The same logic can be applied to how Ibn al-Zayyāt uses the term "slaves" (*ʿabid*). Marín analyses the names of holy men described as black, pointing out that the absence of a genealogical lineage and the appearance of typical slave names hints that some were of enslaved origin.⁵⁸ However, in the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf*, servitude or slavery is primarily a quality of humankind's relationship to God, not human enslavement of other humans. Everyone is a "slave" or "servant" of God (*ʿabd Allāh*). Many individuals in the work are described as being a righteous or pious slave (*ʿabd ṣāliḥ*), regardless of ethnic background or legal status. When the black servant runs to ʿAlī b. Ḥirzihim with news of Ibn Barraġān's fate, the holy man asks if he has "sold" his soul to God, a voluntary enslavement to the divine will, which will bring salvation regardless of one's worldly status. Moreover, through his affirmation and obedience to Ibn Ḥirzihim's instructions, the black servant channels divine power against his earthly master, none other than the Almoravid ruler, ʿAlī b. Yūsuf, who is forced to back down and endorse the respectful burial of Ibn Barraġān. Taken together, the vignettes in the hagiographic literature give a "vindication of certain types of spirituality coming from the margins of society: the countryside, Berbers with little or no instruction in Arab culture, Blacks descended from slaves or enslaved themselves".⁵⁹

The third area of border-crossing facilitated by the rise of popular mysticism relates to gender, namely the recognition of women as spiritual leaders. Although the contents of the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* are disappointing in the extent of female empowerment that they detail, with only seven entries (2.5%) dedicated to women, there are hints that a strong female religious sub-culture existed during the period covered by this work. It may be possible to link this with the role of women as priestesses and soothsayers for their tribes in pre-Islamic times, a phenomenon also hinted at in medieval Arabic Maghribī sources. The legend of the Kāhina, the queen or priestess of the Jarāwa who resisted the Islamic conquest of her people's lands in the Aurès (Algeria) is well-known,⁶⁰ as is the story of Zaynab, spouse and advisor to the Almoravid ruler, Yūsuf b. Tāshfīn, reputed to be a sorceress in some myths.⁶¹ Furthermore, Ḥā Mīm, a Ghumāra tribesman who claimed to be a prophet in the Islamic mode, was described by al-Bakrī as being part of a triad consisting also of his aunt and his sister, the latter of whom was a renowned soothsayer.⁶²

⁵⁶Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, Entry 160, p. 316; Marín, "Etnia y religión", 45.

⁵⁷On the other hand, Marín mentions two cases where the whitening of a black holy man's skin is presented as a miracle, showing a certain instability in the tropes and perhaps an echo of Qur'ānic narratives of the final judgement in which faces will either be whitened or blackened to indicate whether they are destined for heaven or hell. Marín, "Etnia y religión", 43–4.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁹"una reivindicación de ciertas formas de espiritualidad procedentes de los ámbitos marginales de la sociedad: el mundo rural, los bereberes poco o nada instruidos en la cultura árabe, los negros descendientes de esclavos o esclavos ellos mismos" (*ibid.*, 46).

⁶⁰M. Talbi, "al-Kāhina", in *EP*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3785. See also Benjamin Hendrickx, "Al-Kahina: The Last Ally of the Roman-Byzantines in the Maghrib against the Muslim Arab Conquest?", *Journal of Early Christian History* 3/2 (2013): 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2013.11877284>.

⁶¹Ibn Abī Zar', *Rawḍ al-qirtās*, 170.

⁶²Al-Bakrī, *Description de l'Afrique*, 100.

Like other male writers, Ibn al-Zayyāt shows little interest in female participation in the world of the *awliyāʾ Allāh* but he cannot elide it completely and his scattered comments and small set of entries on women are rich in implication. Of his seven entries on women, three are anonymous (*majhūla*): an unknown woman, sister of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Tūnisī (Entry 7); an unknown adolescent girl (Entry 112); and an anonymous woman from Marrakesh (Entry 207). Entry 112 is especially interesting. The prepubescent girl in question belonged to the Haskūra tribe and had retreated to a cave in the High Atlas. A reputed male holy man, Abū Mahdī (Entry 111), encouraged another man to join him in visiting the girl whom he said was a “friend of God” and the latter was amazed by the knowledge she shared, which he “did not know”, despite her evident ill health. They returned another day only to find a light shining from the cave, causing Abū Mahdī to say that the girl was in her death throes. When they entered the cave, she asked them to shroud her and inform her parents of her passing. As they departed they saw her transported up into the air, symbolising her reunion with God.⁶³

From the socio-historical perspective, this story suggests that the role of priestess (*kāhina*) had become recast as that of a female Muslim mystic, possessed of gnostic knowledge. There is no indication that this young Haskūra girl had access to formal education or Arabic, but her withdrawal to a cave while still a prepubescent virgin marked her out as a person with a special connection to God. Her status was validated by the visits of male holy men who saw nothing askance in consulting a young girl, testimony in itself to how different the social world of rural religious practice was from that of highly-educated urban ‘*ulamāʾ*’, as well as the new thread connecting them.

Ibn Zayyāt’s named female entries shed further light on the recognition of women in this environment. They are Munya bint Maymūn al-Dukkālī (Entry 160), whom we have already encountered being punished for eating non-*ḥalāl* food and darkened by her devotions; Fāṭima al-Andalusiyya (Entry 167); Umm Muḥammad Tin al-Salāma (Entry 209); and Umm ‘Aṣfūr Tīazzāt bint Ḥusāyn al-Hintifī (Entry 210). With the exception of Fāṭima al-Andalusiyya, all these women belonged to Maghribī tribes or tribal peoples and moved in the same rural to urban migrant circles as their male counterparts, and were embedded within the *ribāṭ* networks of the time.

Munya bint Maymūn came from Meknes but settled in Marrakesh. When she died, she was buried outside the Dabbāghīn gate. Her biography describes her visiting Ribāṭ Shākir and, reading between the lines, playing a leading role in the activities of the aspirants (*murīdīn*) coming to the *ribāṭ*, whom she told an informant included “1000 female friends of God”.⁶⁴ In fact, the anonymous subject of Entry 207 was an elderly woman from Marrakesh who visited Ribāṭ Shākir during Ramaḍān 603/1206–7 with a large group. She fell off her donkey on the night journey back and, when men went to help her, her modesty was miraculously preserved by an illusory white cloth that was nowhere to be seen in the light of day. A member of the group responded to the general astonishment by saying, “I know this elderly woman, she is a holy woman who lives in the Bāb Aghmāt area of Marrakesh”.⁶⁵

⁶³Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Tashawwuf*, Entry 112, pp. 265–6.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, Entry 160, p. 316.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, Entry 207, p. 386.

In addition to hinting at the widespread participation of women in popular pietistic and charismatic religious practices, the female biographies also stress that such women did not serve only women but were visited by men who learnt from them and whose anecdotes form the basis for their biographies. In fact, it is through their instruction of men and performance of miracles recognised by them that these women enter Ibn al-Zayyāt's canon, as we saw with the unknown girl from the Haskūra tribe. Similarly, the prowess of the Maṣmūda holy woman, Umm Muḥammad Tīn al-Salāma, is conveyed via her servant Abū Bakr, who complained he had seen nothing miraculous. She told him to fast and repent, and then watch through the night. During his vigil, he saw her in-law arrive in the form of a crane, converse with Tīn al-Salāma, and then depart.

Tīn al-Salāma was said to have been one of 14 Maṣmūda holy women who could fly. Her powers also involved prophecy: she was said to have fainted and then revived with a celebratory yell. When criticised for her unseemly behaviour, she announced the Muslim victory at Alarcos and was later vindicated.⁶⁶ The reference to public criticism of her behaviour, prior to its coding as prophetic, is intriguing and hints at how holy status and piety could provide liberty from social constraints on female behaviour. The same observations may apply to female travel to the *ribāṭ*s.

Conclusion

Several studies have engaged with Ibn al-Zayyāt's *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* and its implications for mysticism and sainthood in the eleventh–twelfth-century western Maghrib. The purpose of this article has been to think about the opportunities for social boundary crossing and convention breaking offered by the development of popular pietistic and charismatic approaches to Islam. Many of the practices described, from ascetism to divine intervention and miraculous actions, already existed in the religious sub-structures of society, the majority of which was rural and tribal. However, in earlier centuries, such practices were dismissed by urban 'ulamā' and the Arabic-educated urban elite in general as superstitious, if not heretical, and un-Islamic.

The great waves of Islamisation taking place in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the formation of empires ruled by dynasties from the rural tribal milieu facilitated the fuller Islamisation of rural religious beliefs and practices, and the garbing of older types of religious exemplar in Islamic robes. At the same time, the theological and epistemological development of mystical approaches to Islam created cross-cutting links between urban Ṣūfīs and their rural counterparts, which were strengthened by the rural to urban migration swelling the towns of the time and the development of the *ribāṭ* infrastructure. While many Ṣūfīs were highly educated, they did not deny the possibility of God directly granting spiritual knowledge to the uneducated and they valued markers of the Muslim spiritual elect that inverted the social hierarchies of their day, whether they related to poverty and social status, colour or gender. Although the number of entries directly related to disadvantaged groups in society is not a large percentage of the total, especially in the case of women, their presence in

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, Entry 209, pp. 387–8.

the *Kitāb al-Tashawwuf* indicates a new direction of travel that enabled some of them to receive popular acclaim and enter the religious elite.

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